

The Education of John Holt - Mel Allen

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*His first book **How Children Fail** sounded an alarm for the modern school system and helped launch the educational reform movement of the mid 60's. Although today there is hardly a teacher in America who doesn't know his name, few, if any, know the man....*

“A lot of people have come to me and said, “Your books have changed my life, and I believe them.” John Holt.

One afternoon this past July I went to see John Holt, who was working in his fourth-floor office on Boylston Street in downtown Boston. Holt, possibly this country's best known, if not its most controversial education writer, was sitting on a stack of newspapers four inches high placed on a chair in front of a desk cluttered with books and papers. The newspapers were yellowing. One was dated February 29, 1980 in front of his desk was a green folding cot, standing upright to shield him from the sun that slanted through the windows.

“I may not be good at making things,” he said, “but I love to improvise.” He pointed proudly to the wooden splint and tape that held the cot upright. He worked bare-chested and wore shorts in the heat; his skin full of freckles, and a fan whirred beside him as he composed on his Olivetti memory-storing typewriter, his pride and joy.

In contrast to so much of the writing on schools and learning, one reads Holt easily, and he has become one of the very few education writers to have reached the masses. *How Children Fail* and *How Children Learn*, the most successful of his nine books, are among the best-selling education books ever.

This afternoon he was putting the finishing touches on a revised edition of *How Children Fail* (to be published this spring by Delacorte). When the original was published in 1964 it all but launched the educational reform movement, a movement that reached its peak a decade ago before being swept aside by “back to basics.”

“My first thought,” he says about his revision, “was that it would be easy maybe add a few words here and there. But I found I had a lot more to say. My thinking had really moved on since then. It's a whole new book. Really John Holt up to date.”

By the mid-seventies Holt had decided that for him, meaningful school reform was impossible. Four years ago he began his own magazine *Growing Without Schooling*. In the magazine, in lectures, on talk shows (after an appearance on the Phil Donahue show Holt received 10,000 letters) and in a new book *Teach Your Own* (Delacorte) he stressed that the best learning environment for a child was not in the school, no matter how humane, but in a supportive home. “It's not that I feel that school is a good idea gone wrong,” he says, “but a wrong idea from the word go. It's a nutty notion that we can have a place where nothing but learning happens, cut off from the rest of life.”

His office is crowded, containing besides Holt, three assistants, and between his book writing and the magazine work, one must walk bowlegged to keep from knocking the boxes of books, or tape

recorder, or stacks of envelopes. Though he claims to know where everything is, in fact he usually doesn't and he will root through boxes, growing more unnerved by the minute. But the alternative is worse: to devote hours – no days – to straightening everything out, time better put to other uses.

“So much seems to be happening in his head all at once,” said a friend. “Whenever he gets an idea he goes after it on a horseback.” There seems little that doesn't intrigue Holt, but at the top of his list would seem to be writing, children, playing the cello, ecology, food and physical fitness, in no particular order. On any given day one might hold sway over all the others. A photographer arrived for a photo session. She said she wanted a photo with children in it. He shifted uneasily. “I won't be photographed playing with children I don't know,” he said firmly. “I won't make them into actors in a play called ‘See How Good John Holt Is With Children.’” He dressed for the photograph. He put on a faded blue work shirt, its pocked crammed with pens. He put on a floppy tan hat to protect his balding scalp from the sun. He picked up an empty plastic shopping bag and set off down Boylston Street, then turned into Commonwealth Avenue. He spied a discarded soda bottle. He popped it into his bag. He spied another. Soon he had filled the bag and emptied it into a trashcan, then began his hunt anew, not without a trace of anger at the litter despoiling a city he regards as utterly beautiful.

John Holt has a shower in his apartment, but he never uses it. When he wants to bathe he places a green plastic dishpan in his bathtub. He puts a few gallons of water in it. He gets in the tub and stands in a very large plastic tray designed for catching crankcase oil. He dips a sponge in the water and squeezes it over his body, the water collecting beneath. When he's finished he carries the water through his kitchen to a small sunken courtyard, where he pours it onto a pile of leaves and garbage. He keeps earthworms in his courtyard and they feed on the pile making compost. He has no garden his own, but someday, when the compost has accumulated, he hopes to carry it to nearby gardens and spread it around.

"My actions sometimes are on the edges of some kind of normal distribution curve," he says, "and I guess that's what eccentric means. But they are not queer or nutty. My actions are eminently sensible. We have to save water and turn waste into soil. It's my contribution, however small, to a situation I can't do much to change."

He crossed to the Public Gardens and through the Common. He is not a romantic about children but the sound of their laughter or crying always stops him, and he must investigate what is going on. Hearing children laugh is often enough to start him laughing as well. He watches children with the intensity of a naturalist observing from a blind, and whenever he sees them looking back at him he turns away abruptly as though suddenly fascinated with a passing cloud.

On the playground a boy of about six approached the top of a concrete mountain, grasping handrails as he climbed. Suddenly a man clambered after the boy, lifting him to the top.

"No, no." Holt muttered. "Who is that man? What's he think he's doing? That child doesn't want or need his help." He walked to the mountain and looked crossly at the man, who seemed not to notice. For a moment Holt seemed ready to say something, but the moment passed and he remained silent. "I've finally learned the limits of argument," he said. "It took me a long while but

I've learned when to save my breath." His interest in children sometimes prompts people to question why he never married and raised a family of his own, especially when they learn that his two sisters have six and five children. Others have wondered how he could ever really presume to understand children, and worse, to give advice about children, without ever having to come home dog-tired from work to face a house full of kids.

He answers he would like to have married; it wasn't his doing that he never did. He adds that his books are not a set of theories, but come entirely from his observations and his contacts with hundreds of children over many years in their homes and schools, watching many of them grow from infants into adults.

"But sometimes," says a friend. "he'll see children doing something and he'll rave about it and I'll think 'nearly every mother knows that'. To which Holt replies. "Yes, but I want mothers to know these things are important."

Eighteen years ago Holt would send to friends copies of letters he had written to a teaching colleague named Bill Hull. They were filled with his observations on how children learned or failed to learn in his classes. He was trying to solve a puzzle. He taught under seemingly ideal conditions. His biggest class being only 20 children. He was free to try things out. But the good students stayed good and the bad students stayed bad. He explained things to the kids and they seemed to understand, then the next time he gave a test, they'll flunk again.

One friend Peggy Hughes, whose children Holt taught says, "His letters made my children come alive for me." She urged him to make a book of them. Eventually the letters caught the interest of a young publishing house named Pitman. They were edited into a book, *How Children Fail*. It went all but unnoticed.

"At a bigger publisher it would have been remaindered and out of print in six months," Holt says, "but Pitman needed titles and kept it on." Meanwhile he wrote another letter, this one to Eliot Fremont-Smith, book reviewer of *The New York Times*.

"I don't mind being ignored," wrote Holt, "but I think I'm saying something unique." Fremont-Smith read the book and wrote a front-page rave. "Possibly the most penetrating and probably the most eloquent book on education to be published in recent years...." The next month it sold 2000 copies. "There's no question if that hadn't happened there'd be no *How Children Learn*."

Once he was out walking when he heard a whisper as he passed by: "That's John Holt." He had a rush of vanity followed by, "Oh damn, that takes away my privacy." He prefers the story of the woman from the Harvard School of Education who exclaimed. "Everyone at school knows your books but nobody know who you are." He thought happily. "That's just the way I'd like to have it."

One day in mid 1980 John Holt went to Keene, New Hampshire, to give a speech at the Antioch New England Graduate School of Education. The lectures are a necessity. His fees of up to \$ 1,000 (often less) help sustain his magazine, and he lives under constant financial tension despite royalties from his books. The room where he spoke was small, and packed with 200 people. Once he outdrew Bob Hope when both appeared in a small Ohio city, and he has often talked to audiences of several thousand, but he says ruefully, "I was more of a media star then."

As often happens, his lecture rambled following the convolutions of his thoughts. He has a high, flat voice, and he spoke slowly, at times stopping dead in mid-sentence to better collect his thoughts. He talked about the failure of schools and the future of home-schooling, using phrases that were as well-worn and familiar to his devotees as a neighbourhood walking path but if they had heard it or read it all before, they seemed not to mind it.

“We don’t need to be taught how to learn: we’re born knowing and wanting to – it’s our nature, our genes, our biological inheritance. The hardest thing for parents to learn is hands-off. Teach less, not more.”

“Beyond a very small dose, teaching impedes learning. The way we can help learning is by answering their questions if and when they have them, helping them, if and when they ask for help.”

A woman stood up. “I’m a professional educator,” she said, “thought I hate to say it in this room. It doesn’t seem to me that public schools are to blame they aren’t the villains.”

He answered sharply. “The word ‘villain’ didn’t come into the conversation until you put it in. Neither did the word ‘blame’. You brought these words with you.”

During his lunch a dark haired woman came over. “What bothers me,” she said, “is that there seems so much chance in letting children decide what they want to learn. Shouldn’t there be an element of something more than chance?”

“Well,” he said, “we disagree on the amount of chance.”

I don’t know she persisted, “I just think there is so much we can _”

He cut her off. “Fine, if that’s what you think. Good. You have a right to think it. I think something different.”

The woman paused bewildered. She seemed to expect something more but Holt’s hunch was that she just wanted to argue. After many lectures people ask him. “How can you be so patient?” but on this day his patience wore thin. He was as he said, “All argued out. It’s a waste of time.” He noticed a baby crawling in the centre of the floor. Somebody had dropped an orange and the baby was crawling towards it. He walked over and leaned down. He wanted to see what the baby did with the orange.

As a young man John Holt had no interest in children. He wanted to be a physicist. He was the oldest of three children in a well-to-do family. His father was an insurance broker who raised his children between New York City and fashionable Connecticut commuter towns. By the ninth grade Holt was attending a prestigious New England boarding school, and later an even more prestigious eastern university, but he always requests that their names not be revealed.

“I no longer believe in degrees,” he says, “and if I could get rid of mine I would. I quit answering questions about my educational background a long time ago, except to say the things I’m supposed to know so much about I never learned in schools.”

He refers to his childhood as ‘gloomy’ and by his own account as a teenager he was unpopular. But at boarding school he often found classmates outside his door at exam time. The word has spread that Holt could explain how to do math and science better than the teachers. By the time he went to college he desperately wanted to be liked. The more I worried and the harder I cried

the less liked I seemed to be. But at college too the lines formed outside his door for tutoring and advice on term papers. It was in 1940 and to flunk out meant certain military duty. He was never one to turn anybody away. "If somebody were to ask me what sort of a name I would apply to myself," he says, "I would say, I am a problem solver. I like to solve my own problems and if people ask me, help to solve theirs."

He graduated from college in 1943 and was commissioned an officer on the submarine *Barbero*, which he calls, "the best learning community I have ever known."

"I was 21 and this was the first real job I'd ever done. It became my job to keep the boat in underwater balance to prepare it to dive everyday."

"Once when I was officer of the deck the captain came on deck. He said, "You know, Jack, you're not a passenger up here. You can turn this thing in a big circle if you want to." But what he was really saying to me was. 'If you have to turn it in a circle in order to feel that you really have the power to do it – then do it.' And that ten-second sermon had a great effect on me."

The submarine sank two enemy ships in the Java Sea before it was damaged by a bomb. On the way to Pearl Harbour after repairs word came that Hiroshima had been destroyed by an atomic bomb. Holt, the former Physics student, thought world devastation would be only a matter of time. He saw a solution in world government, and when he was discharged he began working for the World Federalists in New York City.

He stayed six years, giving over 600 lectures, bombarding newspapers with letters, and in his travels becoming an instant uncle to over 50 World Federalist families.

He toured Europe for a year after leaving the organisation, and when he returned home he visited his sister, who lived near Santa Fe. He said he was thinking of becoming a farmer. She replied he was wonderful with her children so why didn't he teach? No, he said, that didn't sound very pleasant.

But she persisted and told him to visit Rocky Mountain School near Aspen, which had just opened. They would grow their own food he could learn farming there.

He liked the school and stayed without pay in exchange for room and board until a regular teacher quit and he was hired. He slept in a converted wood shop, stepping over mounds of sawdust to reach his cot. "They gave me the bad students to teach," he says "but it has always been from the bad students that I learned something. You may have fun talking to the A students but you don't learn anything about teaching from them."

Four years later he moved east to Boston. He was then 34 years old. He came to study music and a friend offered him an apartment at the foot of Beacon Hill where Holt has made his home ever since. He began observing a fifth grade class in an exclusive private school.

The school hired Holt but within a year grew disenchanted by, among other things, his insistence that testing was probably harmful to learning, and fired him. He taught in two other private schools, but his beliefs about learning met with little favour there either, and again he was fired. "Schools were always a means to an end for me," he says. "I had to work in schools in order to answer my questions on learning and children's intelligence. But I never identified myself as a schoolteacher. So today when some people who still want to reform schools accuse me of

desertion, my feeling is that I never signed up in that army in the first place.”

John Holt’s friends, when asked to describe his approach to life call him “childlike” “I am happy to say they’re right,” Holt says.

Sometimes, in his enthusiasm, he fails to realize that everything that happens to him, everything he observes, may not interest others equally. “He will cook a potato,” says a friend, and when he tells about it, it will be like he’s the first person who ever cooked a potato.”

He has already made plans about how he will handle his eventual demise, an experience he intends to take full advantage of. “I’m going to be the central actor in the drama of my own death,” he says. “I’m going to say to whoever comes by. ‘Death is the agenda here. I’ve done lots of other things and it’s what I have left to do. If you don’t want to talk about it, don’t come here.’” Hull says, “I like listening more than talking most of the time. One of the things I like most about visiting friends is that I get a vacation from talking.”

His friends smile at this view of himself. When he visits friends he often will talk from Friday to Sunday, spilling out ideas, describing his dreams, discussing books and concerts, and his friends will be worn from the effort to keep pace while he leaves invigorated. He takes his deepest quiet from music. “One of the best things I like about my cello is that it is worthless,” he says, but once after playing a duet with a five-year-old girl, he emerged from the bathroom of his host, yellow toothbrush protruding from his mouth, to exclaim. “We need more fun in music. More giggles. Did you notice how her bow hand relaxed when she giggled.”

“His feelings lie very close to the surface,” says a friend. “When he’s with us we’re either laughing or crying. Whenever he tells a story he is not just telling it, he’s reliving it for us.” He is always moved when telling of his friendship with A.S. Neill, the famed founder of Summerhill School in England. He met Neill for the first time in 1965, shortly after *How Children Fail* came out, and was to be heir to Neill’s belief that children can be trusted to learn about their world with little adult interference. And in the crusty Scotsman who delighted in bawdy Scottish jokes told in a thick burr, Holt had found a friend.

Shortly before Neill died in 1973, Holt returned to Summerhill. His book *Escape From Childhood* had just been published and he was anxious about Neill’s opinion. But Neill said, “I’ve not read your book. I can’t read books anymore. I can’t remember what I have read.” So they talked of growing old and Neill said, “I have no fear: Death is” – and he gestured – like blowing out a candle. There’s no future that I look forward to seeing. But there’s just one thing,” he said. And he leaned close to Holt and said, “I can’t stand not knowing how it’s going to turn out.”

It was early June, a few weeks after his speech in Antioch, New England and John Holt sat in the shade by the pond in the Boston Common watching the swan boats glide by. His blue work shirt and green Levis were slightly torn. Except for indulging in classical records and Brazil nuts he is frugal with himself. “He just doesn’t seem to want things,” says a friend, “but if a friend needs money for a project, he finds it and he never seems to care if the project works out or not.” I was with him and I had told him that I had often thought his writings had altered my life. A decade earlier I had been teaching fourth grade in a public school in Maine. He nodded.

“I think the largest good we reformers did was we changed a lot of people’s lives. A lot of people who were teaching and kidding themselves over what they were doing saw more clearly what was going on, and got on to something else.” I asked what had gone wrong with the reform movement: days that Holt calls “my gung-ho period.”

“Teachers are not very brave about change,” he said. “I used to think 75 percent of the teachers I met were allies,” he said. “Then 50 percent, then 25. Now I think a lot of people I thought, as friends were really not – they were enemies. I discovered that I couldn’t talk to teachers about any kinds of changes, however small, even tiny little ways to teach addition or spelling, without saying. “Why are you criticizing us?” They believe that everything they are doing is right and anything that goes wrong is not their fault. They are hermetically sealed to any change. To my friends who still call themselves reformers I say, “You change the schools so that children can at least talk at lunchtime. Until you’ve done that don’t talk to me about how I should change them.” “I think in time the home schooling movement will do more to change schools than anything I ever did when I spent most of my time talking to schools. Only when enough people give them a vote of no confidence will schools begin to think seriously about change.”

“Of the 24 years I’ve lived in Boston, I’ve been known as a kind of educational expert for 17 of them. In those 17 years only one person connected with the Boston school system has ever talked to me. He was a teacher of remedial mathematics to Hispanic school kids. He called up and asked if he could talk about some of his problems. I said sure. We talked and he went away with a bunch of suggestions. Sometimes after he said to me. “I tried out all that stuff and it really helps.” And he’s the one person who ever came to me for help in solving a problem.”

Suppose, I asked, the home schooling movement stopped growing, with its influence as fleeting and as muted as that of the reformers – what would John Holt do then?

He smiled, “A boxer once told me,” he said, “ you never practice after getting up from the mat.”